

Sharing Merciful Love: Forgive All Injuries

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Forgiving someone is necessary in our everyday lives. And yet it is often the hardest thing to do. This is something that I am, at times, painfully aware of as I strive to lead a Christ-centered life. For me, it has been hardest to forgive the people I love or care deeply about. Sadly, often it has been easier to forgive someone I despise or care for very little. It reminds me of the saying, “You always hurt the ones you love,” the paradox that those who give us the most joy can also be the cause of the deepest sorrows and hurts. I can easily forgive an acquaintance or colleague for a disrespectful act, but not so easily do I forgive a relative or dear friend.

The level of hurt goes hand in hand with my level of love. It is in these moments I struggle to remember that the One who loves the most, Jesus, died on the Cross for me to do exactly this: forgive. During Lent, we often focus on renewing our faith, with the Triduum and Easter Sunday as the fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery. But this mystery is not a once-a-year remembrance of a historical event. As members of the Body of Christ, we relive and encounter this mystery and perfect gift at every Mass. We are incorporated into the Paschal Mystery at our Baptism: we are baptized into the suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. This means that, while throughout our lives we share in his suffering and Death, we are assured that any pain and dying will ultimately lead to resurrection.

How We Feel vs. How We Respond to Hurt

I remind myself that forgiveness does not mean it is wrong or even “sinful” to experience anger or feel hurt. It is how I resolve those feelings that makes a difference. I cannot change the past. I need to resist the temptation to stew in my strong emotions, waiting for the opportunity to “get back at” the other person. Clinging to my hurt and anger, as understandable as it may be, in the end only harms me. When I carry anger and hurt it affects all of me and drags me down, blinding me to the holy moments around me. It may also blind me to recognizing any personal culpability.

When God calls me to forgive, he is offering me a gift of freedom. While many in our society may see forgiveness as a weakness, to forgive and move forward is a sign of strength in the Lord. If I am truly to reconcile with the person who has injured me, forgiveness is foundational and non-negotiable. At every Eucharist, redemption and reconciliation are made present as Christ offers his Body for the salvation of the world, for our forgiveness. Reconciliation is at the heart of every Mass, not only as a memorial of the Paschal Mystery, but in the penitential rite, the Gloria, the Kyrie, and the Lord’s Prayer, in which we ask for the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness.

The Biblical Call to Forgive

I remember a time when I had been extremely hurt in word and action by a friend who is also a priest. I struggled for various weeks with my inability to forgive him and avoided going to Mass when he was the celebrant. Until one day I “misread” the schedule and ended up at Mass with him as the celebrant. Not only did those prayers strike my head and heart, but the Gospel for the day was **Matthew 5:20-26**, which includes: “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” The message was so clear to me.

Saint Paul wrote “... [bear] with one another and [forgive] one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do” (Colossians 3:13). As we learn to offer others forgiveness, we can move forward and pursue reconciliation.

Forgive and Leave the Rest with God

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that I am able or even should resume relationships with people who have done me great harm. Sometimes relationships are harmful and/or dangerous for my spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. Accepting and receiving the gift of forgiveness requires a growing relationship with God and a trust that he sees and knows all things. As my relationship with God continues to grow, it becomes enough for me to know that if someone who has harmed me does not ask for my forgiveness or acknowledge their wrongdoing, it is okay. God sees all things, understands all things, and will deal with things in the best way. Increasingly, I am content to leave most things to him, but I am still a work in progress. And every time I encounter Christ in the Eucharist, I am reminded that he never asks anything of me that he himself has not first done—including forgiveness. Even when the other person rejects my forgiveness or is unable to acknowledge that they needed to be forgiven, I remain a vessel of God’s mercy.